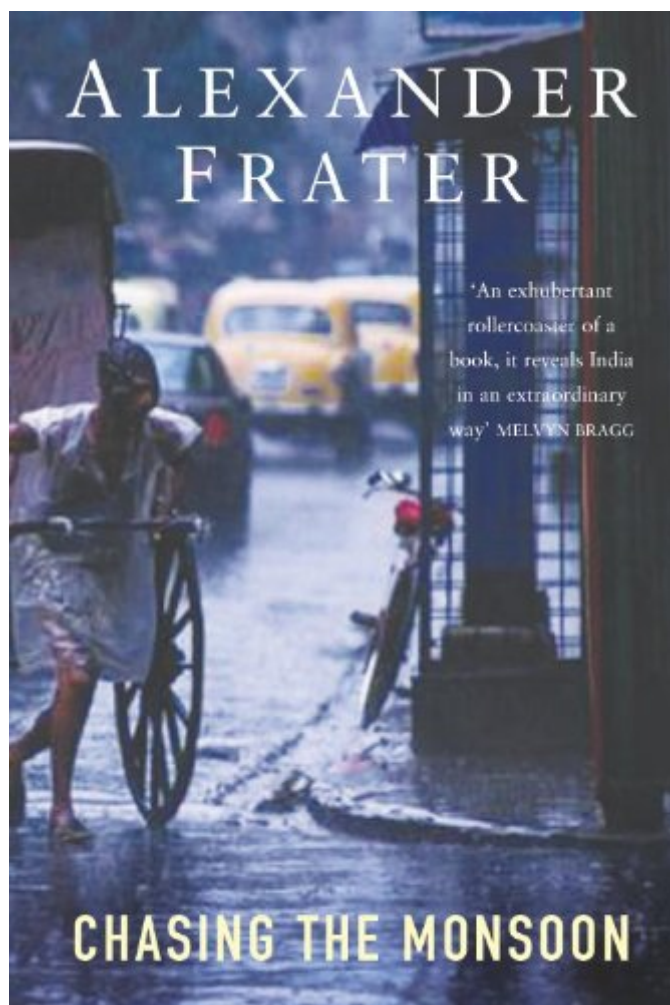


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# Chasing The Monsoon: A Modern Pilgrimage Through India



## Synopsis

On the 20th May the Indian summer monsoon will begin to envelop the country in two great wet arms, one coming from the east, the other from the west. They are united over central India around the 10th July, a date that can be calculated to within seven or eight days. Frater follows the monsoon, staying sometimes behind it, sometimes in front of it, and always watching the impact of this extraordinary phenomenon. During the anxious waiting, the weather forecaster is king, and a joyful period ensues: there is a time of promiscuity, and scandals proliferate. It takes him from Bangkok to Akyab in Burma (where the front funnels up between the mountains and the sea). Alexander Frater's fascinating narrative reveals the exotic, often startling discoveries of an ambitious and irresistibly romantic adventure.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Chasing the Monsoon by Alexander Frater was an enjoyable travel book, one that I read in just a few days. The author's intention, as one might guess from the title, was to follow the progress of the summer monsoon through India, beginning in the southernmost tip of the subcontinent, Cape Comorin, and following its progress up the west coast through Trivandrum, Calicut, Goa, and Bombay, then jetting over to Delhi, and then to experience the eastern arm of the monsoon (there

are two arms, one in the east of India, one in the west) in Calcutta and in two places near Bangladesh, Shillong and Cherrapunji (there was a map illustrating his route). Frater began the book discussing his childhood in the New Hebrides, a group of islands in the South Pacific jointly administered at one time by both France and the United Kingdom, how growing up his missionary father helped instill in him a fascination for weather. His father had talked about one of the rainiest spots on Earth, Cherrapunji, India, which was known at the height of the monsoon season in July to get as much as 75 feet of rain, though more often in the 30 to 40 foot range, receiving as much as 40 inches in one day. Though Frater's father never visited Cherrapunji and lost interest in meteorology due to mounting family financial problems and the Second World War, Alexander himself never completely lost interest in the weather. After relating how he finally decided to follow the monsoon in the summer of 1987 and if possible visit Cherrapunji, he detailed his pilgrimage throughout India. Though Frater did discuss some of the science of the monsoon and in particular the history of its study (noting such famous researchers as H.F. Blandford, who beginning in 1875 became the first of a line of India-based climatologists who studied the monsoon and Sir John Eliot, his successor, often called the "father of monsoon studies"), the book is more a travel than a popular science book, detailing what Frater saw in India and in particular local reactions to the monsoon (or its unfortunate absence in drought-stricken parts of the country). Throughout most of India, the onset of the monsoon rains, the "burst," was eagerly anticipated, the arrival of life-giving rains and cooler weather celebrated for centuries in art, poetry, and song. Frater visited remarkable pavilions, palaces, gardens, and fountains where the very wealthy had in the past had sought to recreated the cooling rains of the monsoon during times of heat and aridity. Though many cities and regions have unofficial dates when the monsoon is supposed to begin - for instance around June 5 in Goa - the actual advance of the rains is unpredictable, subject to much discussion and even heated debate on the street, with many people hanging on every word of travelers to areas already experiencing monsoon rains, meteorologists, and even astrologers. I must say I was rather surprised that the monsoon traveled slowly enough through India that Frater for the most part was able to keep ahead of it, as while the first burst over Cape Comorin occurs generally around June 1, it is nearly July 1 before it reaches Delhi (if it reaches it at all; Frater chronicled how the monsoon rains had failed to arrive in recent years). Overall Frater did an excellent job of conveying the tense atmosphere of expectation among those waiting for the rains and the sense of relief and jubilation once they had arrived. When the rains did arrive there was often great rejoicing with almost unofficial holidays in many parts of the country. Even in businesses that did not close had workers from cashiers and waiters up to expensively dressed businessmen and women running outside to

cavort in the rain. Adults and children played in the rains, planned parties celebrating it, and even not unlike Frater himself planned trips to see it (the author wrote of oil-rich wealthy Middle Easterners flying on their private jets to India to witness such vast amounts of rain for themselves). Additionally, people associated the monsoon with cures for a variety of ailments. The "monsoon cure," which could be anything from specific diets to being massaged in special oils to meditation with the onset of the rains, was big business, particularly in western India. So important were the rains in providing a relief from the heat, watering crops, filling wells, and regenerating lakes and rivers, that much like with the monsoon cures an entire industry existed to ensure the arrival of the rains, ranging from ceremonial well diving to crackpot inventors to cloud-seeding with aircraft to singing ancient songs called ragas, composed especially to bring on the monsoonal rains. Not everyone welcomed the monsoon. Frater detailed the great difficulties of officials in Calcutta in handling the floods brought about by the monsoon, and hinted at but didn't go into detail about the massive floods in Bangladesh the rains often brought. Fishermen and sailors often couldn't work in the high seas, cyclones, and driving rain during the height of the monsoon and pilots often had great difficulty flying in monsoon weather. Back when India was a British possession some Englishmen became depressed, alcoholic, or even committed suicide due to the rains. A portion of the book detailed Frater's attempts to get permission from Delhi to visit Cherrapunji, as it was located in a region subject to anti-immigrant riots and fighting (something he might have gone a little bit more into). As foreign travel and even travel by Indians themselves to that area was tightly controlled, Frater had to navigate the intricate, complex, positively Byzantine corridors of Indian bureaucracy. This theme seems to be a common element of Indian travel writing, a topic addressed also in *An Area of Darkness* by V.S. Naipaul and *The Search for the Pink-headed Duck* by Rory Nugent. Though I would have liked a bit more science and maybe some photos, overall I enjoyed the book.

great personal story the includes lots of information about the character of monsoons and the affect on the culture

Alex has to be the most humorous observant gifted and politely satirical writer EVER. His best work is "Beyond the Blue Horizon" however whatever he writes is hugely entertaining and full of hidden meaning which needs 2 or 3 re reads to assimilate the full context. His aviation and seaplane passion is infectious and accurate. Alex is a must read author. Perry... Australia

The sheer poetry, amusing encounters, and descriptions of this book are delightful. If it ever rains

again in California, I too hope to have a formal dress attire party like in Bombay and have all of my guests rush out into the first rain

WONDERFUL BOOK ESPECIALLY NOW THAT WE'RE DEALING WITH GLOBAL WARMING.

Well worth the effort, a fine account of one of the great natural events of life, played out against the backdrop of India

Great book for Indianophiles. Also a great read and insight into Indian culture. Funny and thoughtful. I highly recommend this book.

These two complement like bread and butter, I read this book long time back, now I am doing it the second time and that too slowly.

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